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Oliver Mtukudzi, Renowned Zimbabwean Musician, Is Dead at 66

Oliver Mtukudzi performing with his band, the Black Spirits, in Atlanta in 2002. He became a star in Zimbabwe in the 1970s and later performed across the globe.

Scott Gries/Getty Images

By [Giovanni Russonello](#)

Jan. 29, 2019



Oliver Mtukudzi, whose singing and guitar playing harnessed influences from across Southern Africa to create the most popular musical style in Zimbabwe, died on Jan. 23 in Harare, the nation’s capital. He was 66.

The cause was heart failure related to diabetes, said Damon Forbes, a record executive and promoter who had worked with Mr. Mtukudzi for more than 20 years.

Starting in the late 1970s, Mr. Mtukudzi (pronounced muh-too-KOOD-zie) recorded numerous albums — 67, by his count — and became a hero throughout Africa. The Zimbabwean music journalist Alex T. Magaisa [wrote](#) that Mr. Mtukudzi was “arguably Zimbabwe’s finest ambassador.”

Though an official figure was not available, conservative estimates suggest that Mr. Mtukudzi sold millions of albums over the past 40 years.

He sang anthems of social lament and timeless wisdom, typically in Shona, Zimbabwe’s predominant language, but also in English and Ndebele. His music pulled from traditional Shona rhythms and sounds while incorporating influences from South Africa’s more cosmopolitan, jazz-inflected mbaqanga tradition, as well as African-American dance music. What resulted — a kind of soundtrack to Zimbabwean life in the late 20th century — became known as its own idiom, called “Tuku music,” after Mr. Mtukudzi’s nickname.

“I looked for a sound the guitar couldn’t make, in a guitar,” he told the South African publication TshisaLIVE in an [interview](#) shortly before his death, remembering his early years. “Professional guitarists at the time used to laugh at me. I used to look for a mbira on the guitar strings,” he said, referring to a traditional [Shona thumb piano](#).

In the 1970s, as a member of the band Wagon Wheels, he played alongside the singer Thomas Mapfumo, who would become the only other Zimbabwean musician with a reputation to rival his. Mr. Mapfumo left the country in the 1990s and became well known in the West. Mr. Mtukudzi stayed, and cemented his status as the country’s most renowned musician.

His popularity in Zimbabwe reflects the fact that in a country bitterly divided by political allegiances, he positioned himself as a unifier. While Mr. Mapfumo took a strong political stance in his music — pioneering a genre known as

chimurenga (“revolutionary struggle music” in Shona) before the fall of white minority rule, then vigorously criticizing Robert Mugabe, who ruled the country from 1980 to 2017 — Mr. Mtukudzi generally avoided taking a political side. He sang at events for the ruling ZANU-PF party, as well as the wedding and funeral of the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

But his songs boldly told the stories of his communities, and he made no effort to avoid social issues. Perhaps his biggest hit was [“Todii,”](#) a cautionary song about the perils of H.I.V. from the 1997 album “Tuku Music.” Powered by a melancholy chorus of background singers and the gravelly lament of Mr. Mtukudzi’s lead vocal, it warned listeners of the virus that by then had infected a quarter of Zimbabwe’s population.

Another popular song, “Neria,” from 1993, told of a woman thrown into poverty by a law that kept her from inheriting her husband’s property. Written as part of Mr. Mtukudzi’s soundtrack for [a feature film](#), it so impressed the filmmakers that they changed the name of the movie to “Neria.” Nine years later, the same filmmakers made “Shanda,” a documentary about Mr. Mtukudzi that documented him as he toured Zimbabwe.

Many of his songs urged government leaders as well as everyday people to focus on the well-being of Zimbabwe’s children. And Mr. Mtukudzi did throw the occasional veiled political swipe. In 2001 he released [“Wasakara,”](#) whose title translates to “You are worn out,” a song widely seen as a plea for Mr. Mugabe to step down.

Mr. Mtukudzi, left, with an unidentified musician at the Pakare Paye Arts and Music Centre in Norton, Zimbabwe, in 2018. Mr. Mtukudzi spent his last 15 years running the center, an arts complex that has a recording studio, classrooms and performance spaces. Jekesai Njikizana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“He was a nation builder,” Paul Mangwana, a senior Zimbabwean government official, told The Associated Press. “Where it was necessary to criticize he would, and where it was necessary to praise he would.”

Mr. Mtukudzi sought to strengthen his community through deeds as well as music. For the last 15 years, he ran the [Pakare Paye Arts Center](#), an arts complex he founded in 2003 in Norton, a town 25 miles west of Harare. With a recording studio, classrooms and performance spaces, it aims to offer young people a creative and social outlet that would help combat unemployment and listlessness.

In 2011 he was named a Unicef regional good-will ambassador for Eastern and Southern Africa. A year before, he had written a song, “Deaf Hear,” in observation of Unicef’s Day of the African Child.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe acknowledged Mr. Mtukudzi’s death in a [statement on Twitter](#). “Oliver Mtukudzi,” he wrote, “your voice has given us comfort during difficult times, and will remain with us for posterity.”

Oliver Dairai Mtukudzi was born on Sept. 22, 1952, in Highfield, a dense, impoverished neighborhood of Harare. (The city was officially known as Salisbury at the time; what would eventually become Zimbabwe was then the

British colony of Southern Rhodesia.) His parents had met after singing in a choir group, and they encouraged his blossoming musical interests.

His father died just as Oliver was entering adulthood, and to support his family he took a job at a bookstore. But he filled every idle moment practicing on the guitar that a musician had given him after noticing his preternatural ability.

He joined Wagon Wheels in 1977. Though it was a short-lived band, it nonetheless raised his and Mr. Mapfumo's profiles. The next year, during the final days of the Zimbabwean revolution, he released "Ndipeiwo Zano," his debut album with his own band, the Black Spirits. The title track testified to the experiences and determination of a dispossessed people.

Throughout his career, Mr. Mtukudzi kept his family and his work entwined. His brother, Robert, was his keyboard player until he died in 1992. His daughters often sang background vocals and helped him compose. His initial plan in Norton was for his son, Samson, also a successful musician, to run the Pakare Paye center, but Samson died in a car accident in 2010.

Mr. Mtukudzi's survivors include his wife, Daisy; his daughters, Sandra Mtukudzi, Samantha Mtukudzi and Selmor Manatsa; and three sisters. An earlier marriage, to Melody Mtukudzi, ended in divorce.

Starting in the 1990s, Mr. Mtukudzi increasingly performed across the globe: at sports stadiums in Africa, at Western festivals like Coachella and WOMAD, and at the Hollywood Bowl. Bonnie Raitt covered a Mtukudzi composition, "[Help Me Lord](#)," and helped introduce him to Western audiences.

He remained active until months before his death, even as he was plagued by complications of diabetes. In October he played for a crowd of more than 20,000 in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Speaking to TshisaLIVE, he defined his approach to music in intimate terms. "According to my mother, she believed that I will never come up with a song that surpasses my birth cry. From that, I've been making music to compare to that first cry," he said. "What my birth cry *meant* to my mother — that is the kind of music I make."



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